

The Bell Tower

Newsletter of the First Congregational Church of Hatfield, UCC

2023

July

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Who We Are (Part 2)

In this month when we celebrate the 247th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it is helpful to remember that the ideals promulgated in that document did not drop wholly formed from the sky. The ideals of the Declaration emerged from the lives and aspirations of the Colonists, and they in part, arose from the Congregational Church.

The Pilgrims and Puritans were radicals. In an age of hierarchy and heredity, these radicals believed in democracy and equality because that is what they read in the Bible. Church had to be a choice. It could not be coerced. Believers needed to understand church teachings and policies because they needed to have a stake in decision making. This meant that for them authentic belief entailed informed belief. With the rejection of hierarchy and heredity, the Pilgrims and Puritans turned to knowledge and education.

In early May, I attended the Franklin Association's Annual Gathering where Margaret Bendroth was the keynote speaker. She is from the Congregational Library. She mentioned something I had not heard previously. When she finished her talk, I even asked if I had heard her correctly. I knew that in Colonial Massachusetts a town could not be incorporated until it had established a Congregational Church, but she noted that it was not only a church that was required. A church and a school were necessary before formal incorporation.

This is a direct result of the Congregational Way. The members of the church needed to be educated so that they could assume responsibility for church decision-making. At a time when ignorance, which is not in any sense akin to stupidity, was the general rule, in Colonial Massachusetts there was a higher proportion of literate people than possibly anywhere else in the world because of universal public education. Religion and education were in a symbiotic relationship; they relied upon one another.

This educated and informed church membership was seen as the vehicle through which the

Holy Spirit would make known the will of God. Individual members of the church covenanted with each other, bound themselves voluntarily to one another, for the greater good. They consented to share their authority as opposed to being coerced into accepting another's power. They would not be compelled to work together, but they chose to do so because they were fully informed, fully empowered and free.

This respect for covenant was so strongly ingrained in those religious radicals that they were not satisfied with majority decisions. Believing in the singular will of God made manifest through the church's democracy, they strove for unanimity. If there were disagreements, they would have to stop and take account. This is how Margaret Bendroth explained it: "If the dissenters were relatively few, they had a duty to state their concerns publicly and then accept the 'sense of the meeting' with appropriate grace. If disagreement was stronger, pastor and people set aside the matter and waited for what Samuel Mather described as 'natural light and Christian prudence to emerge – a process which could sometimes take a very long time.'" This was not the most practical way to govern, but think about the respect it shows for covenant, that each person in the community would be able to concur to the group's decision.

This religious practice influenced the political. Each ordinary person was valued. Colonial New England was politically radical in this way. It was the most democratic and participatory government in the world. And the Congregationalist of New England brought this system with them to the Continental Congresses, which eventually adopted the Declaration of Independence, and that wondrous ideal that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights ...". This ideal remains a goal toward which we must continue to strive and may Independence Day remind us of this unfinished work.

JUNE EVENTS

Tue. 4 th	Independence Day.
Tue. 11 th	Online <i>Exploring the Bible</i> study group from 7 – 8:00pm.
Tue. 25 th	Online Bible study group will meet from 7 – 8:00pm.

REGULAR GATHERINGS

Sundays: Worship Service begins at 9:30am online and in person. Sunday School begins after the children’s sermon during the worship Service.

Mondays: The Joyful Ringers Bell Choir rehearses from 6 - 8:00pm.

Tuesdays: Yoga classes are offered every Tuesday in the church parlor at 5:30pm.

Thursdays: Choir rehearses in the parlor at 7:00pm, but not in July and August.

JOYFUL RINGERS BELL CHOIR

The Joyful Ringers participated in our worship Service for the first time in a very long time on Sunday, June 4th. It was wonderful to have their music fill our Sanctuary again. The group rehearses on Mondays from 6 – 8:00pm. Anyone who is interested is welcome to become a part of the Bell Choir. Younger or older, church member or bell enthusiast, experienced or novice, we would love it if you would come forward and add the gift of more music to our sanctuary. If you may be interested, please reach out to Rev. Randy at randyc1897@gmail.com or Sue M., the Music Committee Chair.



BIBLE STUDY GROUP and THEN WHAT?

Our online Bible study group is reading from the Acts of the Apostles and then the Gospel of John. If you would like to join us as we read of the early days of the church and then of John’s unique take on Jesus’ life and ministry, we would love to have you join us. Let’s read, study and discuss the book that literally has changed the world. Send an email to randyc1897@gmail.com for the login. We meet on alternate weeks for one hour.

When we complete John’s Gospel, we will have made our way through a survey of each of the Bible’s books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. It has taken quite a while, but we were not rushed. We had no deadline. A survey course skims the text, highlighting the themes not focusing on every verse. My question is what to do next.

If you were thinking about something that may interest you enough to give a couple of hours a month to an online study/discussion, would it be delving more deeply into a given book in the Bible, talking about church history, maybe a book club, or maybe something completely different? Would you share those thoughts with Rev. Randy? I’m just wondering what direction to go once we finish our survey of the Bible. Thanks.

SUMMER SUNDAYS?

The Deacons have been discussing ways in which to make summer worship a bit less formal. There may be interactive sermons. We could ask people to share their faith stories. We could invite speakers from the Food Bank, Fisher Home, HEADS Up, Prospect Meadow Farm, or the CROP Hunger Walk. If you have suggestions, please share them with Rev. Randy or any of our Deacons.

GIFT CARDS

Big Y and *Stop and Shop* gift card sales are a continuing fundraiser of our congregation. Please contact Linda M. if you would like to purchase any. The church earns 5% on all sales. Thank you.

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<i>Christian Education, Anita W.</i>	<i>Real Folks Society, Martha Z.</i>
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